



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION



Seven Sacraments - Confirmation I (c. 1637-1640) by Nicolas Poussin, public domain.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

OPENING PRAYER

- Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.
- Option 2: Use the prayer which is below.

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.
I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
I love you: let me love you more and more.
I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
I worship you as my first beginning.
I long for you as my last end.
I praise you as my constant helper.
And I call you as my loving protector.
I want to do what you ask of me:
In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.
Let me love you Lord as my God.
And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.
A Christian called to respect and love all whose lives I touch.



Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session.
We have marked a stopping point half way through the material.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the **Breaking Open the Word** worksheet for this week.

Catholic Faith, Life & Creed Version 2.0

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in
the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

June 27, 2011

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Sharing Human Experience

Catechist begins:

Christians believe that the Holy Spirit continues the presence, life, and work of Christ in the world today. Even if we are unaware, the Spirit is active in our lives. When we awaken to that presence, we look at our lives in a completely different way.

Catechist invites participants to engage in the following exercise. They will need paper and pens.

- ▶ Consider your lives. Take a panoramic view. Consider the movements, transitions, and key events. As you look back on your life, can you see evidence of the Spirit's work, the Spirit's promptings (perhaps unheeded, but prompting nevertheless)?
- ▶ Make a list of all the key events in your life. Leave space under each event. Initially just list the events.
- ▶ After you have listed the events, go back and spend a moment of reflection on each event.
- ▶ How might the Spirit have been present in that event?
- ▶ Write your responses under each event.



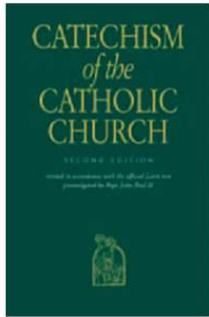
Keeping time

Allow ten minutes for this exercise.

Catechist invites participants to share insights gleaned with one other person for a brief period and then surface insights in the wider group.

In the wider group, ask:

- ▶ What did you learn about the Holy Spirit's role in your life from this exercise?



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles 1285-1321.

Catechist continues:

Confirmation is one of three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

- ▶ Baptism offers life; it initiates us into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Baptism also incorporates us into the waters of new birth and rebirth.
- ▶ Confirmation strengthens life; it initiates us with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Confirmation confers the Holy Spirit. It strengthens Christ's life within us.
- ▶ Eucharist initiates us into the Eucharistic community. It sustains us with Christ's Body (present in community, word, and sacrament). "Ordinarily confirmation takes place within Mass in order to express more clearly the fundamental connection of this sacrament with the entirety of Christian initiation. The latter reaches its culmination in the communion of the body and blood of Christ" (RC 13).
- ▶ In summary, baptism offers life, confirmation strengthens life, and Eucharist sustains it. The three sacraments are intimately connected.
- ▶ The three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, celebrated in that order, are the normative means for initiating new members in the Church.

Catechist invites questions if any, and then continues:

Baptism. Through the waters of baptism, we are incorporated into the Body of Christ through the Spirit. We die to sin and become a new creation in Christ. We enter the waters of rebirth and are welcomed by the One who knows us best and loves us most.

Catechist invites group discussion.

- ▶ Whether or not you are baptized, the Spirit is still a significant force in our lives.
- ▶ What does it mean to you that through baptism we become a new creation in Christ?

- ▶ Do you know anyone who demonstrates that they have been recreated in Christ's image?
- ▶ If you are already baptized, what evidence is there in your life?
- ▶ If you are not baptized, what expectations does baptism hold for you?

Catechist continues:

Confirmation. Confirmation is a special outpouring and strengthening of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is the gift of the Holy Spirit through the sign of oil and the imposition of hands. The sacrament permanently seals us to Jesus Christ and commits us to live as a disciple.

Eucharist. Through the sacrament of the Eucharist, we receive Christ, body, soul, and divinity, in each sacramental form of bread and wine. Eucharist completes our initiation. It is the fullest sign of our incorporation into the Eucharistic body of Christ. It is a sacrament that unites us as one body in Christ. That is why it is called an initiation sacrament. It is the most complete sign of our membership in the body of Christ. We become what we have received, the body of Christ.

Catechist invites participants to share in groups of four and then share insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that in the sacrament of Eucharist we become what we have received?
- ▶ Have you ever known anyone who “became what they received?” Describe how that person embodies that truth.
- ▶ If you were to “become what you receive” what would you hope that concretely means in your life?

Catechist continues:

- ▶ The Church directs us that when we prepare people for the sacraments, they are to have opportunities for conversion.
- ▶ Sacraments are opportunities to deepen our faith in Christ.
- ▶ Those preparing for the sacrament of confirmation not only prepare for the sacrament, but through such preparation, they deepen their conversion to Christ.
- ▶ A misconception about the sacrament of confirmation is that it is an adult acceptance of the faith, a sacrament of adult maturity, a rite of passage, and a way of confirming the faith given to us.
- ▶ Many confirmation candidates, when asked, insist that the sacrament makes them soldiers of Christ and that they are given the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While their affirmation is not incorrect, what is primarily given in the sacrament is the Holy Spirit. Rarely do such persons mention the actual conferral of the Holy Spirit.

- Confirmation is not dependent on the action of the recipient. Confirmation is God's action; it is not about what the individual does. It is about what God does.

Theological and historical context for confirmation

- It is important to understand the history of confirmation and what has happened to the sacrament.
- Most Catholics believe the above-mentioned misconceived theology. However, the sacrament of confirmation never expressed a “rite of passage” theology.
- Some elements of the former theology are true, but not primary. We do receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit but that is not the primary action of the rite; it is simply a result.
- Very well-intentioned folks who truly believed what they taught passed on erroneous confirmation theology. There is a reason for their belief.
- The belief in an adult acceptance of the faith, a sacrament of maturity, and a rite of passage was appropriated from Protestant traditions. Such theology embodies a Protestant understanding of the sacrament of confirmation. It is not Catholic theology.
- The Apostolic Constitution for the Rite of Confirmation expresses a very rich theology of the sacrament. “The body is washed, that the soul may be cleansed; the body is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated [made holy]; the body is signed, that the soul may be fortified; the body is overshadowed by the laying on of hands, that the soul too may be enlightened by the Spirit; the body is fed on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul too should be nourished by God.”¹ The Apostolic Constitution affirms that the essence of this sacrament is the conferral of the Holy Spirit upon the faithful.
- Why have well-meaning instructors taught an incomplete, if not erroneous theology? It was a logical mistake and it has its roots in Church history.
- In the early Church, people were baptized, confirmed, and received Eucharist at the same celebration by the bishop. When the Church was small, this posed no problem. The bishop was able to preside at every person's initiation.
- However, in the year 313 Constantine made Christianity legal alongside all other religions. It quickly became politically expedient to become a Christian. By 380 under Theodosius, Christianity was the official religion of the empire. The practice of wide-spread infant baptism coincided with these events as well. As a result, the catechumenate, a three-year process to form people in the faith, declined with the influx of large numbers of Christians. Quality was sacrificed in the name of expediency.
- As the Church grew, the bishop could no longer preside at the initiation of all the Church's new members. The right to baptize was given to priests, but the bishop retained the right to confirm.
- That meant that confirmation, which was understood as part of the initiation rites for new members, became separated from baptism and Eucharist. In addition,

¹Tertullian, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, VIII, 3: CCL, 2, 931.

Eucharist became separated from baptism with the emergence of infant baptism. As a result, the three sacraments of initiation became separated from each other.

- ▶ However, in spite of the many changes in the rite since the earliest days, one constant remained in relation to confirmation. It has always been understood as the conferral of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ When confirmation was separated from baptism, it was also delayed. It was generally moved to later in a child's life, usually around adolescence. Some places retained an early age for reception (the Rite of Confirmation affirms the age of reason) but placed its celebration after Eucharist. The practice most places in the United States has reception of the sacrament taking place approximately between ages 14 and 18.
- ▶ Standing by itself, the theology of confirmation was not readily observable as a sacrament of initiation. Some people jokingly say it has been a sacrament in search of a theology. Well, it always had a theology; it just became muddled and confused due to the pastoral practice surrounding it.
- ▶ People appropriated the common Protestant theology of the sacrament as a rite of adult passage because it made sense in light of practice.
- ▶ When parishes celebrate the sacrament of confirmation during adolescence, it does not require a huge leap to associate it with a rite of passage. Every culture and many religions celebrate rituals of adult passage. People logically placed confirmation in this context. Confirmation is not a sacrament of adult maturity or a rite of passage. When celebrated after Eucharist, it is out of its intended order. But that does not mean its place as a sacrament of initiation has been altered.²
- ▶ Vatican II insisted that we renew our sacraments and make them more observably express what they mean. There has been a concerted post-conciliar effort to renew all the sacraments and set forth their appropriate theology. Implementation and promulgation of such efforts have been slow, but certain.
- ▶ In summary, the sacraments of initiation incorporate us into the life of Christ. Baptism forgives sins, incorporates us into Christ's death and resurrection and into his life. It makes us adopted children of God.
- ▶ Confirmation seals us with the Holy Spirit so we will be permanently configured to Christ.
- ▶ Confirmation helps us more perfectly grow in the image of Christ.
- ▶ It strengthens us to live the gospel and bear witness to Christ in the world.
- ▶ Eucharist fully initiates us into the Eucharistic community, the body of Christ. Through this sacrament of unity, we become fully initiated members of the Church through participation in Christ's life and presence—body, soul, and divinity. All three sacraments invite us to take what we have received and offer it to others in the world.
- ▶ Once again, baptism gives life, confirmation strengthens life, and Eucharist sustains life.

²The bishops of the United States are presently studying this issue. Some bishops have already restored the appropriate order of the sacrament—baptism, confirmation, Eucharist.



If dividing the session into two sessions, stop here and move directly to the Mystagogy below. Choose one or two questions for your final reflection and end with a closing prayer. When you begin the next session, begin with the opening prayer and move directly to this point and continue to the end.

Symbols of confirmation: oil and laying on of hands

Catechist continues:

In this segment, we will break open the symbols of confirmation: the sacramental sign of laying on of hands and sacred chrism or oil.

The laying on of hands

- ▶ All the sacraments and the liturgy of the Catholic Church include the laying on of hands. Catechumens have hands laid upon them in the rite of acceptance and various rites throughout the process of initiation. The conferral of hands expresses our invocation of the Holy Spirit who effected a change through that sign.

Catechist invites participants to engage in the following questions with one other person then share insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What does it mean in everyday life when hands are used to touch another person? ³
- ▶ Consider your life. Can you name a time in your life in which you were aware of God's healing touch?

Catechist poses the following questions and invites participants to respond in groups of four, and then share insights with the wider group. Catechist shares a story from his or her life and then invites others to similarly answer the questions and share from their life experience. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ Based on your experience of touch in everyday life and your experience of God's healing touch, why do you suppose the laying on of hands is an important symbol in the Church?
- ▶ Please describe your experience when and if hands have ever been laid upon

³The sign of touch embodies both positive and negative meaning. Do not avoid the negative. Use it as an opportunity to describe the stark contrast between the two. The Spirit of God is life-giving and can overcome evil in all its forms. It is possible that someone in the process has been negatively impacted by inappropriate touch. This reflection could well be the catalyst for desperately needed healing and the encouragement to seek professional help.

- you in a sacramental setting. What did the gesture mean to you?
- ▶ If the sign expresses a changed reality (for example, bread is changed into Christ's Body through hands extended over bread) in what way did a change occur in your life (for example, conversion, change in attitude or way of life)?
 - ▶ What does the sign of laying on of hands reveal to us about God, about Christ, and his Spirit?

Theology: Laying on of Hands

- ▶ The Church teaches that through the sign of oil and the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit is conferred.
- ▶ We are sealed with the Spirit at confirmation. We are sealed with an indelible mark, a permanent seal that cannot be repeated. Like baptism, confirmation is not repeated.
- ▶ The oil of confirmation configures us to Christ.
- ▶ Through the laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit is invoked.
- ▶ When the priest or bishop imposes hands, it is called *epiclesis*, a Greek word that means invocation.
- ▶ Every sacrament includes the laying on of hands.
- ▶ When the priest extends hands over a person or object, he asks that the Holy Spirit transform the person or object into a new reality.
- ▶ The laying on of hands has always been part of the Rite of Confirmation.
- ▶ The primitive Church imposed hands to confer the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ A gesture evokes and represents the apostolic laying on of hands.

Biblical perspective of laying on of hands

- ▶ The power of the Holy Spirit is given to the Church today by the laying on of hands. It is a sign of the action of the Holy Spirit. The imposition of hands confers the gift of the Spirit in all sacraments.
- ▶ The imposition of hands was used ritually in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. Hands were extended over offerings in response to the laws of sacrifice. (Ex. 29:10, Lev. 1:4; 4:4, 24, 29, 33, 8:14).
- ▶ The imposition of hands sets things apart for a sacred purpose.
- ▶ It is used as a gesture of blessing.
- ▶ Hands outstretched over an assembly, blesses the entire group (Lev. 9:22).
- ▶ The imposition of hands assigns power to another person. Leadership was passed on through the laying on of hands (Num. 27:23).
- ▶ In the New Testament, the hand was associated with power. Hands were imposed to heal people. Jesus was asked to heal Jairus' daughter by laying his hands on her.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit was conferred at baptism through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6).

- ▶ The laying on of hands was also a sign of mission. The apostles laid hands on the seven and they were assigned a special service (Acts 6:6).
- ▶ The laying on of hands was also associated with the installation of some office, either the office of presbyter or the office of apostle (2 Tim. 1:6).

Theological perspective of laying on of hands

- ▶ The imposition of hands is believed to be the origin of the sacrament of confirmation.
- ▶ Pope Paul VI affirmed that the sacrament of confirmation (laying on of hands) continues the grace of Pentecost (*Divinae consortium naturae*).
- ▶ The gesture means the same thing today as it did in antiquity: sign of power, installation of office, ministry, transfer of authority, healing, and blessing.
- ▶ It is a symbol of the ongoing life of the Holy Spirit, which continues in the Church today.
- ▶ Every liturgical action exercises the epicletic action of calling down the Spirit of God to bless, sanctify, transform, and effect the desired grace.
- ▶ Hands are laid on the elect as they are immersed in the life giving waters of baptism
- ▶ Hands are imposed on the confirmation candidates as they are anointed with the Spirit of God.
- ▶ Hands are imposed over bread and wine invoking the Holy Spirit to transform the elements into Christ's body and blood.
- ▶ Hands are imposed over the community as the presider blesses and dismisses it to go forth and live the Good News.
- ▶ The bishop is the ordinary minister of confirmation but canon law and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults give permission to the pastor of the parish to confirm when people are coming into full communion with the Church.
- ▶ The Catholic Church accepts the baptism of individuals from other Christian traditions because it recognizes one baptism for the forgiveness of sins (provided the baptism is valid: done in the name of the Trinity and water is poured). However, the Church does not recognize confirmation of other traditions. First, our theology differs. Second, the primary minister is the bishop. For confirmation to be valid in the Church, there must be an unbroken line of apostolic succession from St. Peter through to the bishops of today.

The symbol of oil

Catechist invites each person to massage lotion or massage oil into his or her hands. Then begin the following exercise.

- ▶ What are some of the properties and uses of oil in everyday life?

Take easel paper and divide it into two. On the left side write the heading: **USES OF OIL**. On the right side, write the corresponding heading: **PROPERTIES OF OIL**. Each use evokes a corresponding property. For example, a use of oil might be sun tan lotion. Its corresponding property might be called, "healing balm."

Catechist leads a discussion about these questions:

- ▶ How do these uses of oil in everyday life remind us about God?

- ▶ How might the symbol of oil as we use it in life speak to us about who God is for us?
- ▶ In what way does oil express the inexpressible?

The theology of oil

- ▶ OIL is easier to rub in than rub off.
- ▶ Oil has healing and medicinal qualities.
- ▶ It is an essential element of life.
- ▶ It is used in cooking, for energy, lubrication, and protection from the elements.
- ▶ Oil is a precious world commodity; wars are fought over its control.
- ▶ Oil is a lubricant and an emulsifier—a unifying agent. Oil holds all the ingredients in a recipe together.
- ▶ All those aspects found in the natural world can be used to express the reality of the Spirit.
- ▶ Our natural experience of oil reminds us of the Spirit.
 - The Spirit stays with us.
 - The Spirit heals and is a soothing, calming presence.
 - The Spirit is balm for our wounded soul and strength in times of need.
 - The Spirit is the unifier that holds God's people together.
 - The Spirit is our life force.
 - Oil expresses the ineffable reality of the Spirit.
 - The Spirit strengthens us when we must lay down our lives for the sake of this precious new commodity: life in Christ.
- ▶ Oil is necessary for life.
- ▶ The human body must have oil to survive.

See appendix # 1 for an example that illustrates the importance of oil in the human body.

- ▶ Just as oil is necessary for the body, sacred chrism is necessary oil for one's spirit.
- ▶ We should be willing to lose all in our quest for it.
- ▶ Chrism seals us to Christ; it permanently forges us in intimate union.
- ▶ The cross of Christ is branded to our person.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit strengthens us to embrace the cross, to live and die for others, to live the paschal mystery, and to be a witness to Christ in the world.

Biblical sign of oil

Catechist reads the following passages from Scripture: Samuel 16: 9-13; 1 John 2: 24-27. Then the catechist leads a discussion on these points:

- ▶ What speaks to you in these passages and why?
- ▶ What do the scripture readings teach us about the sign of oil?
- ▶ In what way might you relate what is said about oil and anointing in the readings to your own experience as a Christian?
- ▶ What do these Scripture passages about oil and anointing teach us about the sacred chrism that is used in confirmation?

Scriptural warrant for the sacrament of confirmation

GROUP EXERCISES:

The following optional exercises might be divided according to the size of your group. One group might participate in exercise A while the second group participates in exercise B. Adapt accordingly.

(Exercise A would require more time than the customary allotted time for an extended catechetical session. This could be used in a retreat in preparation for the sacrament of confirmation or it can be omitted altogether. It is an amazing exercise when done well and appropriate time is given for reflection.)

Optional exercise A:

Provide an unfinished wooden plaque for each participant. Invite them to trace an image of the cross on the plaque. Invite them to burn that image into the wood with a wood-burning tool.⁴ After the image is burned into the wood have the candidates rub and polish the surface of the plaque with linseed oil until it is smooth-like a fine piece of furniture. As they engage in this artistic exercise, invite them to contemplate on the power of the Spirit to permanently seal Christ to our lives, to burn the cross of Christ into our hearts, to seal us with the Spirit in order to make us into a more perfect image of Christ. Invite them to keep their plaque as a reminder of the power of the Spirit to transform us throughout our lives.

Exercise B:

- The Church provides specific Scriptures to reveal the meaning of confirmation.
- The following Scriptures have been chosen from the repertoire appointed for confirmation.
- Each one reveals some portion of what we believe about the sacrament of confirmation.

Catechist divides the group into three groups. A Bible is needed for each group. Invite each group to read and reflect on two of the following passages from Scripture that are included in the Rite of Confirmation and express the meaning of the sacrament. Make a copy of the questions for each group. When the group reassembles, each group proclaims their scripture and provides a synopsis of their dialogue concerning each Scripture passage.

- ▶ A reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. 36:23b-28
- ▶ A reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 1:3a, 4a, 13-19
(Please note: this scripture has the words that accompany the anointing with oil at confirmation. "Be Sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.")
- ▶ A reading from the Acts of the Apostles: 19:2-6
(Note: The Spirit came upon the people through the laying on of hands—another of the symbols of confirmation. The Spirit is conferred through oil and the laying on of hands.)
- ▶ A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew 3:13-17.
- ▶ A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke 4:14-21
- ▶ A reading from the Holy gospel according to John. 14: 15-18.

⁴The finished wooden plaques may be purchased at a reasonable price at craft stores or perhaps there is someone skilled in wood working in the parish that would be willing to make the plaques. Wood burning kits may be purchased at craft stores. If your group is large, you may want to purchase more than one kit.

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in dyads and then share insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What speaks to you in this Scripture?
- ▶ What do you think the Scripture is trying to convey?
- ▶ In what way does this Scripture reveal the meaning of confirmation?
- ▶ What does this Scripture reveal about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit?
- ▶ How does this scripture speak to your relationship with God?



Community Connections

Liturgy, Scripture, and doctrine challenge us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world. The Spirit empowers us to go out and transform the world.

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity taking place and arranges for group participation. For example: “God’s Spirit is powerfully active in our parish. There are so many ways to reach out to God’s people. Our parish is sponsoring a free trade sale this weekend intended to see the wares of third country communities so they can secure a fair price for their labors. They need volunteers to help with the sale. Volunteers are also needed at our social concerns office; you can call for more information.”



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to share together about the following questions:

- ▶ What is given in the sacrament of confirmation?
- ▶ What is the Holy Spirit’s role in the sacrament?
- ▶ What are some common misconceptions about this sacrament and what gave rise to them?
- ▶ What are the effects of the sacrament?
- ▶ What are the symbols of the sacrament and what do they mean?
- ▶ What change in you can you expect as a result of the sacrament?

Catechist invites participants to respond in faith to one or more of the following

challenges.

- ▶ In what way does this teaching on the sacrament of confirmation challenge you at this time in your life?
- ▶ In what way is the Spirit prompting change in your life?
- ▶ What needs to change?
- ▶ In what way does today's session invite you to more fully enter into Christ's death and resurrection? What do you need to *die to* in your life right now?
- ▶ Where is new life or resurrection needed? What can you do to make that happen?
- ▶ What are you powerless over and where in your life is the power of the Spirit needed to intervene?
- ▶ What one thing are you willing to do this week in response to what we have shared today? Change a belief, a behavior, an action, and an addiction?

Journal

Spend time this week reflecting or writing about some of the questions from this session which remain unfinished for you.



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with intercessions, Doxology (“Glory be to the Father...”), a minor rite: a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA # 90-97.

Option 2. If this is *not* a catechumenal setting, end with the Sequence from Pentecost Sunday. Include Intercessions and the Lord’s Prayer.

Sequence

Come, Holy Spirit, and from heaven direct on man the rays of your light. Come, Father of the poor; come, giver of God's gifts; come, light of men's hearts.

Kindly Paraclete, in your gracious visits to man's soul you bring relief and consolation.

If it is weary with toil, you bring it ease;
in the heat of temptation, your grace cools it;
if sorrowful, your words console it.

Light most blessed, shine on the hearts of your faithful — even into their darkest corners;

for without your aid man can do nothing good,
and everything is sinful.

Wash clean the sinful soul, rain down your grace on the parched soul and heal the injured soul.

Soften the hard heart, cherish and warm the ice-cold heart,
and give direction to the wayward.

Give your seven holy gifts to your faithful, for their trust is in you. Give them reward for their virtuous acts; give them a death that ensures salvation; give them unending bliss. Amen.

Alleluia.⁵

⁵“Sequence, Pentecost Sunday,” *The Lectionary*.

Appendix

#1. I recall a powerful experience of hands being laid upon me that in looking back effected a powerful change in my life. Members of my choir suggested that we celebrate a sacrament of anointing of the sick for my very mentally ill child. Since he would not be able to participate, I sat in proxy for him. The pastor joined our gathered small community and anointed me as he prayed for the healing of my child. He laid hands on me in the sacrament of anointing of the sick but my choir friends also laid hands upon me.

I remember the power of that experience. I knew something had changed but I was not sure what it was. As days turned into weeks, I realized that I was the one who was healed. I had a new strength to turn my child over to God's care. I experienced a greater peace and abandonment to God's will in my life. As a result of releasing my child to God's care, and not trying to control the situation, my child was also released and started to improve. The Spirit truly effects change when we call on him in faith through our sacramental signs.

#2. The movie, *Lorenzo's Oil*, poignantly shows us how oil is essential for life. A young boy is diagnosed with a debilitating disease. After being told that their son will die from this disease, the movie segues to a scene from an Easter Vigil celebration. The Easter candle is processed through the church. One can almost hear the debate, anger, and rage going on in the heart of the mother. Her resolve is written over her countenance. The Easter Vigil scene subliminally suggests that this couple's quest is initiated by God's own Spirit—the Giver of Life. The parents leave the church with holy determination. They would begin their new life. Nothing would ever again be the same for this family. They would begin their life of research, struggle, rebuff and rejection—the paschal life.

The couple's unceasing and untiring efforts ultimately led them to the demon agent of this disease. Lorenzo and others so afflicted were missing a derivative of an oil found in every kitchen—basic olive oil. Lorenzo's parents discovered this missing agent and helped scientists develop a treatment for the disease. Love for their son extended beyond themselves to love for others. Their quest for this holy oil helped not only their son but also others with the same disease.

Handout for Sacrament of Confirmation

Confirmation is one of three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

- ▶ Baptism offers life; it initiates us into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Baptism also incorporates us into the waters of new birth and rebirth.
- ▶ Confirmation strengthens life; it initiates us with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Confirmation confers the Holy Spirit. It strengthens Christ's life within us.
- ▶ Eucharist initiates us into the Eucharistic community. It sustains us with Christ's Body (present in community, word, and sacrament). "Ordinarily confirmation takes place within Mass in order to express more clearly the fundamental connection of this sacrament with the entirety of Christian initiation. The latter reaches its culmination in the communion of the body and blood of Christ" (RC 13).

- ▶ In summary, baptism offers life, confirmation strengthens life, and Eucharist sustains it. The three sacraments are intimately connected.

- ▶ The three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, celebrated in that order, are the normative means for initiating new members in the Church.
- ▶ **Baptism.** Through the waters of baptism, we are incorporated into the Body of Christ through the Spirit. We die to sin and become a new creation in Christ. We enter the waters of rebirth and are welcomed by the One who knows us best and loves us most.
- ▶ **Confirmation.** Confirmation is a special outpouring and strengthening of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is the gift of the Holy Spirit through the sign of oil and the imposition of hands. The sacrament permanently seals us to Jesus Christ and commits us to live as a disciple.

- ▶ **Eucharist.** Through the sacrament of the Eucharist, we receive Christ, body, soul, and divinity, in each sacramental form of bread and wine. Eucharist completes our initiation. It is the fullest sign of our incorporation into the Eucharistic body of Christ. It is a sacrament that unites us as one body in Christ. That is why it is called an initiation sacrament. It is the most complete sign of our membership in the body of Christ. We become what we have received, the body of Christ.

Theological and historical context for confirmation

- ▶ It is important to understand the history of confirmation and what has happened to the sacrament.
- ▶ Most Catholics believe the above-mentioned misconceived theology. However, the sacrament of confirmation never expressed a "rite of passage" theology.

- ▶ Some elements of the former theology are true, but not primary. We do receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit but that is not the primary action of the rite; it is simply a result.
- ▶ Very well-intentioned folks who truly believed what they taught passed on erroneous confirmation theology. There is a reason for their belief.
- ▶ The belief in an adult acceptance of the faith, a sacrament of maturity, and a rite of passage was appropriated from Protestant traditions. Such theology embodies a Protestant understanding of the sacrament of confirmation. It is not Catholic theology.
- ▶ The Apostolic Constitution for the Rite of Confirmation expresses a very rich theology of the sacrament. “The body is washed, that the soul may be cleansed; the body is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated [made holy]; the body is signed, that the soul may be fortified; the body is overshadowed by the laying on of hands, that the soul too may be enlightened by the Spirit; the body is fed on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul too should be nourished by God.”⁶ The Apostolic Constitution affirms that the essence of this sacrament is the conferral of the Holy Spirit upon the faithful.
- ▶ Why have well-meaning instructors taught an incomplete, if not erroneous theology? It was a logical mistake and it has its roots in Church history.
- ▶ In the early Church, people were baptized, confirmed, and received Eucharist at the same celebration by the bishop. When the Church was small, this posed no problem. The bishop was able to preside at every person’s initiation.
- ▶ However, in the year 313 Constantine made Christianity legal alongside all other religions. It quickly became politically expedient to become a Christian. By 380 under Theodosius, Christianity was the official religion of the empire. The practice of wide-spread infant baptism coincided with these events as well. As a result, the catechumenate, a three-year process to form people in the faith, declined with the influx of large numbers of Christians. Quality was sacrificed in the name of expediency.
- ▶ As the Church grew, the bishop could no longer preside at the initiation of all the Church’s new members. The right to baptize was given to priests, but the bishop retained the right to confirm.
- ▶ That meant that confirmation, which was understood as part of the initiation rites for new members, became separated from baptism and Eucharist. In addition, Eucharist became separated from baptism with the emergence of infant baptism. As a result, the three sacraments of initiation became separated from each other.
- ▶ However, in spite of the many changes in the rite since the earliest days, one constant remained in relation to confirmation. It has always been understood as the conferral of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ When confirmation was separated from baptism, it was also delayed. It was generally moved to later in a child’s life, usually around adolescence. Some places

⁶Tertullian, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, VIII, 3: CCL, 2, 931.

retained an early age for reception (the Rite of Confirmation affirms the age of reason) but placed its celebration after Eucharist. The practice most places in the United States has reception of the sacrament taking place approximately between ages 14 and 18.

- ▶ Standing by itself, the theology of confirmation was not readily observable as a sacrament of initiation. Some people jokingly say it has been a sacrament in search of a theology. Well, it always had a theology; it just became muddled and confused due to the pastoral practice surrounding it.
- ▶ People appropriated the common Protestant theology of the sacrament as a rite of adult passage because it made sense in light of practice.
- ▶ When parishes celebrate the sacrament of confirmation during adolescence, it does not require a huge leap to associate it with a rite of passage. Every culture and many religions celebrate rituals of adult passage. People logically placed confirmation in this context. Confirmation is not a sacrament of adult maturity or a rite of passage. When celebrated after Eucharist, it is out of its intended order. But that does not mean its place as a sacrament of initiation has been altered.⁷
- ▶ Vatican II insisted that we renew our sacraments and make them more observably express what they mean. There has been a concerted post-conciliar effort to renew all the sacraments and set forth their appropriate theology. Implementation and promulgation of such efforts have been slow, but certain.
- ▶ In summary, the sacraments of initiation incorporate us into the life of Christ. Baptism forgives sins, incorporates us into Christ's death and resurrection and into his life. It makes us adopted children of God.
- ▶ Confirmation seals us with the Holy Spirit so we will be permanently configured to Christ.
- ▶ Confirmation helps us more perfectly grow in the image of Christ.
- ▶ It strengthens us to live the gospel and bear witness to Christ in the world.
- ▶ Eucharist fully initiates us into the Eucharistic community, the body of Christ. Through this sacrament of unity, we become fully initiated members of the Church through participation in Christ's life and presence—body, soul, and divinity. All three sacraments invite us to take what we have received and offer it to others in the world.
- ▶ Once again, baptism gives life, confirmation strengthens life, and Eucharist sustains life.

Theology: Laying on of Hands

- ▶ The Church teaches that through the sign of oil and the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit is conferred.
- ▶ We are sealed with the Spirit at confirmation. We are sealed with an indelible mark, a permanent seal that cannot be repeated. Like baptism, confirmation is not

⁷The bishops of the United States are presently studying this issue. Some bishops have already restored the appropriate order of the sacrament—baptism, confirmation, Eucharist.

repeated.

- ▶ The oil of confirmation configures us to Christ.
- ▶ Through the laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit is invoked.
- ▶ When the priest or bishop imposes hands, it is called *epiclesis*, a Greek word that means invocation.
- ▶ Every sacrament includes the laying on of hands.
- ▶ When the priest extends hands over a person or object, he asks that the Holy Spirit transform the person or object into a new reality.
- ▶ The laying on of hands has always been part of the Rite of Confirmation.
- ▶ The primitive Church imposed hands to confer the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ A gesture evokes and represents the apostolic laying on of hands.

Biblical perspective of laying on of hands

- ▶ The power of the Holy Spirit is given to the Church today by the laying on of hands. It is a sign of the action of the Holy Spirit. The imposition of hands confers the gift of the Spirit in all sacraments.
- ▶ The imposition of hands was used ritually in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. Hands were extended over offerings in response to the laws of sacrifice. (Ex. 29:10, Lev. 1:4; 4:4, 24, 29, 33, 8:14).
- ▶ The imposition of hands sets things apart for a sacred purpose.
- ▶ It is used as a gesture of blessing.
- ▶ Hands outstretched over an assembly, blesses the entire group (Lev. 9:22).
- ▶ The imposition of hands assigns power to another person. Leadership was passed on through the laying on of hands (Num. 27:23).
- ▶ In the New Testament, the hand was associated with power. Hands were imposed to heal people. Jesus was asked to heal Jairus' daughter by laying his hands on her.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit was conferred at baptism through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6).
- ▶ The laying on of hands was also a sign of mission. The apostles laid hands on the seven and they were assigned a special service (Acts 6:6).
- ▶ The laying on of hands was also associated with the installation of some office, either the office of presbyter or the office of apostle (2 Tim. 1:6).

Theological perspective of laying on of hands

- ▶ The imposition of hands is believed to be the origin of the sacrament of confirmation.
- ▶ Pope Paul VI affirmed that the sacrament of confirmation (laying on of hands) continues the grace of Pentecost (*Divinae consortium naturae*).
- ▶ The gesture means the same thing today as it did in antiquity: sign of power, installation of office, ministry, transfer of authority, healing, and blessing.
- ▶ It is a symbol of the ongoing life of the Holy Spirit, which continues in the Church today.

- ▶ Every liturgical action exercises the epicletic action of calling down the Spirit of God to bless, sanctify, transform, and effect the desired grace.
- ▶ Hands are laid on the elect as they are immersed in the life giving waters of baptism
- ▶ Hands are imposed on the confirmation candidates as they are anointed with the Spirit of God.
- ▶ Hands are imposed over bread and wine invoking the Holy Spirit to transform the elements into Christ's body and blood.
- ▶ Hands are imposed over the community as the presider blesses and dismisses it to go forth and live the Good News.
- ▶ The bishop is the ordinary minister of confirmation but canon law and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults give permission to the pastor of the parish to confirm when people are coming into full communion with the Church.
- ▶ The Catholic Church accepts the baptism of individuals from other Christian traditions because it recognizes one baptism for the forgiveness of sins (provided the baptism is valid: done in the name of the Trinity and water is poured). However, the Church does not recognize confirmation of other traditions. First, our theology differs. Second, the primary minister is the bishop. For confirmation to be valid in the Church, there must be an unbroken line of apostolic succession from St. Peter through to the bishops of today.